

Interview with Bernard Collins
in Eastham, Massachusetts

by Tales of Cape Cod
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Q: Today I'm visiting with Mr. Bernard Collins in Eastham, Massachusetts. Mr. Collins is eighty-one years of age. Can you remember anything about your grandparents?

Mr. Collins: Very little.

Q: On your mother's side of the family?

Mr. Collins: Yes. That's the only ones.

Q: And what were their names?

Mr. Collins: Allen Young.

Q: And where was Mr. Young born?

Mr. Collins: I don't know.

Q: Was he born on the Cape though?

Mr. Collins: No.

Q: Can you tell me about your father? What was his name?

Mr. Collins: Lewis H. Collins.

Q: Where was he born?

BC: North Eastham.

Q: In what year?

BC: I don't know.

Q: And what was your mother's maiden name?

BC: Wiley.

Q: What was her full name?

BC: Eva W. Wiley.

Q: And where was she born?

BC: I don't know. I think South Wellfleet.

Q: Can you tell me about your father as a young boy? Do you remember any stories he might have told you?

BC: No, I can't remember.

Q: Your father used to be in the Coast Guard, right? Can you tell me about that?

BC: Yes, he was in the Coast Guard for thirty-one years.

Q: Tell me all about that. You used to live there with him in the Coast Guard Station, your family.

BC: No. He built a house near the Coast Guard Station and we lived there, but I practically lived at the Coast Guard Station, because

as a kid they used to feed me. Ate all my meals over there. Most of them.

Q: Can you tell me about those meals?

Collins: Oh, yes. They had some good cooks in the Coast Guard.

Q: What did they feed you?

Collins: Everything. I don't remember anything special. That's one thing, the Coast Guardsmen always ate very hearty meals.

Q: Did you have a lot of fish?

Collins: Yes, because back in those days-- you know what I mean, they got very little pay and they had to pay for their own meals. In those days, they practically-- they used to go out fishing on a calm day in a dory and bring in fish, and very little meat.

Q: What sort of stoves did they cook on?

Collins: Wood-burning stoves.

Q: Did you get your wood from the beach?

Collins: No. No, we had to go and cut that.

Q: How many people lived at the Coast Guard Station?

Collins: Nine.

Q: All the time they lived there?

Collins: Yes. They lived there all the time, and they had some

time off in the spring and summer, when there was no wrecks. But in the wintertime they were attached to the Coast Guard every day. Every night and so forth.

Q: Well, if they were married, when did they see their families?

Collins: Just didn't.

Q: Just in the summer on vacation then?

Collins: That's right. Well, I won't say that, because sometimes they'd have a day off and they'd go and see the family.

Q: Do you remember how they used to walk the beaches in those days?

Collins: I certainly do, yes.

Q: Were you out there watching?

Collins: Went with them.

Q: Tell me about that.

Collins: Well, I was only a kid then, you know, but I spent most of my time at the Coast Guard Station and with the men. And I used to walk the beach with them.

Q: At night too?

Collins: Yes.

Q: How could you see though?

Collins: Oh, you can see all right.

Q: Did you have lanterns or lights with you?

Collins: No.

Q: What would you do if you happened to look out and see a wreck?
What would they do? How would they signal?

Collins: They had a lantern that could light if the wind wasn't blowing too much. And they'd light the lantern and they'd wave it. Then they'd go either to the-- one way or the other. If they were halfway-- they walked the beaches about eight and a half miles and then they'd run to the-- because they had a telephone from the station to Cahoon Hollow. So you'd go to the Cahoon Hollow watchhouse that they had, a little house that they had a telephone in, and they'd telephone back to the Nauset, and they would come on with the-- if it was a shipwreck, why they'd come with either the boat or the breeches buoy, according to which they decided to bring. The man that had been walking the beach would decide what pieces of apparatus to bring, and then they'd come from Nauset Coast Guard Station. Which happened on the "Castagna". That was almost at Wellfleet, down by the Wiley Station.

Q: And they'd have to bring the equipment all the way to Wellfleet?

Collins: Yes. That's right.

Q: How did you get it there? By water?

Collins: No. They had it on a cart and came with it overland,

because you couldn't possibly bark the Nauset Coast Guard Station along the bank, because it's grown up so. But you must remember that back in those days there were no trees, no beach plum bushes, and so it was easy going.

Q: When you say back in those days, what are you referring to, about what year?

Collings: Oh, back-- '14.

Q: 1914?

Collins: Yes.

Q: And they were pulled by horse then?

Collins: Pulled by horse.

Q: Over the sand?

Collins: Over the sand.

Q: That was quite a job for a horse, wasn't it?

Collins: Certainly was.

Q: For any distance.

Collins: But the horses, instead of shoes, back in those days they had pads on the horses' hooves, so they could travel the beach sand.

Q: Instead of the regular shoes?

Collins: Instead of the regular shoes.

Q: I never heard that. What do you mean by breeches buoy? Can you explain that to me? Breeches buoy?

Collins: Breeches buoy? It's when they shoot a line aboard a boat. Well, let me get down to telling you something about the "Castagna", because that happened at four o'clock in the morning. The man that was going north discovered the "Castagna" ashore there, down by the Wilder Station, and he sent for a breeches buoy. The breeches buoy-- in other words, it's a whole lot of apparatus, that when you put a line in the cannon, load the cannon, and shoot a line aboard the-- over the boat. And in this instance, of the "Castagna", they shot three lines over the boat. But the men was so frozen up that they couldn't handle the-- pull it in to get a larger line aboard.

So they sent back to the Nauset Coast Guard Station for a surf boat, and the tide happened to be just right, so that they didn't have to go on top of the high banks, but could get down and follow the sea along. Follow the edge of the water down below the bank. So they brought the surf boat from Nauset Coast Guard Station, all the way down there.

Well, when they got it there, they launched it and tried to get off to the "Castagna", which was in the surf, but she was side to, so that it made a lee. And under the bow of the "Castagna" they got out-- there were seven men rowing the boat, and they got out to her and they finally convinced four or five of the men to jump

into the water, overboard, and they'd pick them up. So that they did.

Then they came ashore, and they knew there was more men aboard of her, but there was no way to get aboard the boat. So they came ashore and picked me up, and I got up in the bow of the boat and they rowed me off onto the lee of the boat, the ship, and I got hold of a rope that was hanging over the side of her and I shinnied up and got aboard.

Then I had a rope that wasn't frozen and iced up. I got that aboard there and I hauled my father up aboard. The first thing we saw was the man that was frozen over the wheelbox. He was laying and stretched over there and frozen stiff. Then we got an axe aboard and started to chop the ice away from him, enough to get him off the wheelbox. Then we dumped him overboard, and they took him up at the wireless station to thaw out.

Q: Did he survive?

Collins: He lost both arms and both legs. Lived a very short time after we got him to .

But then we had one more man frozen to the rigging. There is the man frozen to the rigging right there. So Father said, "I'm going aloft. I'm going to shinny up there and get that man out of the rigging." I said, "No, I'll go."

So I shinnied up-- up the rigging until I got up there. I had a rope tied around me, in case I went overboard. Then I dropped the rope down. Got the axe, because I had to have an axe to chop the ice off of the rigging, so to get him off. And I got the line

over top of this crosstree here, and I tied it around this man and got him chopped out of the ice, and then I lowered him down. My father had the other end of the line down on deck and he lowered him down onto the deck.

But that man was-- his arm was holding onto a piece of-- like this, the arm was out there, and unfortunately the damn boat took a lurch, the ship rolled, and when she did, when I was lowering him down, he hit the deck with the arm sticking out, and that arm broke off just like a piece of glass. So we lowered him into the surf boat and then his arm after him. And they took him, but he was frozen stiff.

Q: He wasn't alive?

Collins: No, no. No, he wasn't alive. Deader'n a doornail. But, no, I was involved-- and going along from there--

Q: Let me ask you, Mr. Collins. That was February 17th, 1914?

Collins: Yes.

Q: And that was the Italian-- ?

Collins: Bark Castagna.

Q: And what was the cargo?

Collins: Guano.

Q: Going to Boston?

Collins: Going to Boston.

Q: So they did get the cargo off the ship? Or did it go down?

Collins: No. The ship broke up three days afterwards.

Q: The cargo was lost then?

Collins: Oh, yes. Didn't amount to anything anyway. It was guano, third

No, that went in the ocean. I suppose today they'd say that polluted it.

Q: When you fire a breeches buoy,,do you attach it to the wreck some way? The line?

Collins: Well, you're supposed-- if there's live men on, that are not frozen up, the shot line, this cannon, shoots and the projectile goes over the boat, and then this shot line comes out of a-- is attached to it, and so this little small line, the size of my little finger, but very strong-- and then whoever's alive aboard the ship pulls the shot line in, and to it is attached another line, a heavier line. And then that, in turn, is taken in and a heavy line is dragged off aboard the ship, and then that is attached to the highest place there is on the ship.

Q: In the rigging maybe?

Collins: In the rigging. And then again, on that line-- they put that line on shore on a standard and tighten it down, and then, you see, they have a line that they can run a trolley off on. A breeches buoy is nothing only a heavy pair of pants and a round

floating ring on top of it, and once they get that off there, whoever's aboard ship gets in that and the Coast Guard brings it into shore.

Q: They pull the line in?

Collins: Pull the line in with the breeches buoy on it.

Q: And then if they're going to rescue another person, they have to shoot it back out again?

Collins: No. No, they keep going on the same line, once they get the line taut aboard the boat.

Q: It just goes back and forth?

Collins: Goes back and forth. But, unfortunately, the "Castagna", all the men were frozen up. By the way too, I remember the temperature. Four below zero that morning.

Q: Was it a northeaster?

Collins: A northeaster.

Q: Strong winds too, hah?

Collins: Oh, heavy winds.

Q: You were about twenty-one then, weren't you?

Collins: Nineteen.

Q: You weren't in the Coast Guard then? You were just visiting

there when that happened?

Collins: No, I was just showing up at the wrecks. I always showed up at every wreck that happened. I always was there somehow or other. But unfortunately I froze both hands and my feet, and I was laid up from that trip-- oh, they had me packed in ice for two days in the Coast Guard Station, because I was frozen so. The fact of the matter, today the middle fingers on my hand go numb so that you could chop them off in the cold weather.

Q: How long did it take you to rescue the people there?

Collins: Wait just a minute, let me think. We started in at-- we were there at six o'clock, still dark. The daylight came on, we started operations, and when I got ashore off of the ship it must have been ten, because-- I was frozen, the Coastguardsmen, one on either side of me, walked me back to Nauset Coast Guard Station, and we arrived back at Nauset-- with their help, I was staggerin' along, and they got me up and started packing me in ice.

Q: Did you have any medical facilities out there to treat people?

Collins: No.

Q: Were there doctors around?

Collins: No.

Q: You did that yourself? The men did it for you?

Collins: Yes. No, there was no doctor coming down there. Couldn't

get a doctor anyway.

Q: Do you remember any other wrecks that you were involved in?

Collins: Oh, yes. I've got pictures of them. I've got pictures of the men that we got off of them.

You know, the Coast Guard-- if a ship was off, or any vessel came by, if he had his flags up calling for the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard would have to go whether they wanted to or not, you know. And it was a hard life for my mother, because I remember particularly one square-rigged vessel came by with a flag set for a boarding party, and the Coastguardmen left in the boat and rowed off to her. Of course, there was no communication in those days, although they could set flags that called for a towboat. They went aboard this ship and ^{that was undermanned and} ~~there was one of the men~~ freezing up, and they set the flag to call for a towboat, and my father left on that ship and never came back.

Q: Your father didn't come back?

Collins: No, he didn't come back. None of the Coastguardmen came back. They went south and they ended up in New York eventually, and then came back on the train. But they were gone four days before we ever got a word what happened to them.

Q: They boarded this ship?

Collins: Yeah, and went along as an assistance to the crew of the ship. They just disappeared in the distance as far as we were concerned.

Q: Well, what did they do on this ship? Help steer it? Had something happened to the crew?

Collins: Yeah.

Q: They were sick?

Collins: Yes, they were sick.

Q: And your father-- how many people went?

Collins: Seven.

Q: That was a lot of people, wasn't it? Who took care of the Coast Guard Station while they were gone?

Collins: I did. I was the only kid left. Oh, wait a minute. We had to stand watch in the tower. You know, the tower on the Coast Guard Station. And they-- after two days, they did send uptown and they did get one more boy. He was a boy then.

son. And he came there and helped me keep things going at the station.

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

Q: So can you tell me another story that your father might have told you?

Collins: I can tell you one thing when I got in trouble as a kid. (Calls to wife) Abby! Where's that picture that showed me at the Coast Guard Station?

Abby Collins: It's in that booklet of "Entering Eastham". Want me to get it?

Collins: Yes. You see, Captain Bearse and his wife lived in the Coast Guard Station. They had a little apartment there. Just a bedroom, and they ate all their meals with the Coast Guard people. As I say, we were just across the swampland there and I practically lived at the Coast Guard Station all my life. To prove it, I'll show you a picture. Just a minute.

Q: Captain Bearse, did you say? He was the keeper?

Collins: He was the keeper.

Abby: Here it is.

Collins: That's the Coast Guard Station. This tower on this is where they had to keep a watch twenty-four hours a day, up in there. This is getting the surfboat out. But see that fellow there?

Q: That's you?

Collins: That's me. Captain Bearse's apartment was right on this, and the doorway ended here. Well, they used to invite me in. So I was traveling over across to here one night, just dark. And Mrs. Bearse always had a beautiful cat that she thought the world of, and every once in a while, you know, well, the cat knew me, and so in the semi-darkness, as I would walk across there, I thought it was her cat. But it proved to be a skunk. So kid-fashion, I picked up the skunk and went and opened Mrs. Bearse's apartment

and threw the skunk inside. And, boy, did I get my rear end
whaled for that. They couldn't get the smell out
of the-- even out of the dining room at the Coast Guard.

Q: It didn't spray you though, did it?

Collins: No. No, it didn't spray me at all. I said, nice kitty,
patted it, you know, picked it up, go/to the house, put it in.
When I threw it in, it sprayed everything. But that's the worst
whaling I ever got.

Q: Gave you a paddling, did she?

Collins: Oh! My father did.

Q: Is this the Coast Guard Station that was washed away?

Collins: That's washed away. That's the one that's way out to sea,
the remains.

Q: Do you remember what year that was washed off?

Collins: No. I can remember it, but I can't remember the year.

Q: So this is the next one that was built?

Collins: Yes.

Q: So what did you do in the meantime, while the new one was being
built? What did you do?

Collins: I went to the same place as I always did. Because they

built that new one in two stages. They built just living quarters first and then-- . Maybe that'll give you some dates in there, I hope.

Q: You were born in the Coast Guard Station? Your mother was living there?

Collins: No, she was living--

Q: You weren't born in the Coast Guard Station?

Collins: Not in the Coast Guard Station itself. We had a house that Father had built down there and we were living in that. It was just a hop, skip and a jump over to this house. But not that house there, because that's--

Q: Can you tell me about school, your early days at school? What it was like. Do you remember? Your teachers?

Collins: I never even went to school at all until I was seven years old, because I had no way to get to school, except on shank's mare. When I first started in school, it was in the Town Hall. Used to be the Town Hall. A fellow by the name of Smart bought it. It was in Eastham Town Hall when I first started. And they held school there, except when the town wanted to-- had something going on, and then we didn't go to school. But I can remember it all right.

And then I went to the school where the Historical Society now is. That was the old school. After I got out of primary school, so to speak, then, of course-- well, I got in a little trouble,

and so I got thrown out of that school. And then I came home and I had to-- if I wanted to further my education, after being out of school for a little while, my father came home on liberty one day and said he thought the least I could do was go on to school. So I pulled some strings, a little heartbreak, and I went with a
up here then, and I went to the Orleans school. Graduated from there.

Q: How did you get to school in those days? Did you have buses then?

Collins: No, no, no. You walked.

Q: That was a long way, wasn't it?

Collins: No, from here just up-- you know, you could walk it in half an hour. No-- transportation, and then I got a bicycle finally. Then I got a place to ride. It was all sand. You understand it was all sand roads. This was nothing but a little sand wood road originally out here.

Q: It was difficult riding a bicycle in that sand, wasn't it?

Collins: That's right.

Q: What year was that? In 1915?

Collins: Yes.

Q: Do you remember when they put the road in? The first hard road?

Collins: 1937.

Q: Till that time it was all sand?

Collins: Sand.

Q: Was this the main road?

Collins: To Provincetown. Always was.

Q: Do you remember any of the packets that used to come in?
Did your father ever tell you stories about those, or your mother?

Collins: My father-- I remember my father saying that they used to have all their food at the Coast Guard Station shipped down by the packet from Boston from E. E. Gray. And my father used to go down to North Eastham when the packet came in and get bundles of food that they'd ordered for the Coast Guard Station.

Q: Where's the harbor? Where did the boat come in?

Collins: Down at North Eastham. Down along the shore. It landed down on-- well, sometimes it landed over here at First Encounter, but if it didn't land there, it landed-- if the wind wasn't right, why, the packet would land at what is now First Encounter Beach, and otherwise, if the tide and so forth wasn't just right, they would land down at North Eastham.

Q: They had to come in on the high tide?

Collins: On high tide. And not get caught on the flats.

Q: Do you remember any other stories your father might have told you?

Like the Cape-- how it was in those days? Did he ever talk about stagecoaches?

Collins: Yes. Because John Horton down at North Eastham-- my father lived with John and Horton. They took him as a boy and brought him up, literally. So they owned down there where the driving range-- well, the house is gone now, but the stagecoach stopped there always. That was a lettin' off place for the stagecoach.

So Father did talk about that a lot, because he got to meet as a boy all the people coming and going on the stagecoach.

Q: Do you know the name of that stop? Was it a tavern?

Collins: Yes. Horton's Tavern.

Q: You don't remember any other stories about it? Where did it come from, the stagecoach? From Boston?

Collins: Boston.

Q: And it went all the way to the end of the Cape?

Collins: Yes.

Q: And then would turn around and come back to Boston?

Collins: Yes. Horton's Tavern was a main stopping point in those days. There used to be a big hall and dance hall. If the weather was inclement, the stagecoach would stop there. It would stop there overnight anyway, but if the weather was inclement so that they

couldn't-- if there was a snowstorm or something, so that they couldn't get to Provincetown, they ended up there in North Eastham. Of course Horton and John put the people up, until they could get out of there.

Q: And there was a dance hall there also?

Collins: Well, surely. The whole town of Eastham attended dances there afterwards, after they'd given up the stagecoach. But they had this big hall, the biggest hall, and they held dances and so forth for the entertainment of the customers.

Q: Did your father ever talk about any of those dances?

Collins: No. He was a young fellow then.

Q: What else do you remember about the Cape in your early childhood? What was it like in those days? Do you remember when the trains came in?

Collins: Oh, sure. Hell's bells, yes.

Q: Where was the station in Eastham?

Collins: There was one in Eastham, but the nearest one to the Coast Guard Station was North Eastham Post Office. The train made a stop there. It used to be quite the thing, when I was a young fellow, to go down to the-- I'd walk from there down to North Eastham, which would be two and a half miles, to see the train come in.

Q: How often did it come in?

Collins: It went down, and arrived on the way down-- oh, about six o'clock at night.

Q: Every day then?

Collins: Yes. One train a day.

Q: There were passenger and freight? How many cars would you say?

Collins: First that I remember was the passenger and freight together. They always had a freight car and they'd have four or five cars. But later on, in later years, they had a straight freight train and that would come down in the morning. It was a single track. So therefore they had to stagger things so there'd be no smashups.

Q:
What was the social life like when you were a young boy, around twenty? What did you do for fun? Besides work?

Collins: When I was twenty? Of course, when I was twenty I was living up here, see, so therefore I walked up to Orleans. But the main attraction was the pool tables.

Q: Back then?

Collins: Yeah, back then.

Q: Where were they?

Collins: Where Backus & Soule is now, in Orleans. The pool hall

was there. And dances. But the main attraction for kids my age, twenty, was-- of course, you're talking about the old block that used to be there, and that had a dance hall, and an entertainment hall. Of course in those days all the entertainment was the Kickapoo Indians.

Q: The what?

Collins: The Kickapoo Indians.

Q: Tell me about that.

Collins: Oh, that's the way they used to-- they put on a show and they'd sell Lydia Pinkham's products and so forth at the same time. But they'd always put on an entertainment, so they'd get a crowd there.

Q: And what did you call it?

Collins: What?

Q: What kind of Indians?

Collins: Kickapoo.

Q: Kickapoo. And that was the medicine men that went around?

Collins: Medicine men went around selling Aunt Lydia's-- I don't know.

Q: A cure-all, was it?

Collins: A cure-all.

Q: I was reading in one of the Eastham Town Reports about-- I think it was in 1914 they were experimenting with spraying cranberries. The first time they had ever done that. Did you ever do any cranberry harvesting?

Collins: No.

Q: Eastham wasn't known for-- ?

Collins: No, Eastham was turnips and asparagus.

Q: Did you ever do any fishing, Mr. Collins?

Collins: Fishing? Certainly.

Q: I mean on a boat, commercially. No?

Collins: I owned and operated draggers out of Rock Harbor here, scallop draggers.

Q: When was that?

Collins: Gee, I don't know. There was a piece in the paper about it the other day.

Q: What kind of boats were they?

Collins: Regular scallop boats.

Q: So that was your livelihood, scalloping?

Collins: That was my livelihood. I owned and operated-- there's a scallop boat right out there. I owned and operated about six of

those.

Q: Did you actually operate them yourself or did you have someone to run them for you?

Collins: I had someone to run them for me. But if a Captain happened to be sick or anything, I'd go a trip. Operate and so forth and so on.

Q: You didn't go out too far though? That was just off shore?

Collins: Just off shore. No, I never.

Q: How many years did you have the boats?

Collins: How many? Oh, probably fifteen years.

Q: Did you sell them?

Collins: Yes. Sold them off and decided it was time for me to settle down and take a rest.

Q: I'd like to talk more about your father. Can you tell me any other stories about his experiences? At the Coast Guard Station? Or your experiences maybe. Any other wrecks that you remember?

Collins: I don't remember all of them, but I attended them. We had one wreck that came in right off of the Coast Guard Station. It was on the outer bar. And the Coastguardmen, they took a boat and started to row through the breakers and the boat capsized.

Q: You were on that boat?

Collins: No, I was on shore. And it capsized. Came rolling in the breakers, rolling over and over. Of course, everybody rushed in and gave the men a hand to get up on the beach. And I looked around and my father was among the missing. And as the boat rolled over, I happened to see him, because he'd gotten caught when he tried to get out of the boat when it rolled over the first time. His life vest got caught in the oar lock, and it rolled him under water and it was thrashing down on his back. That laid him up for two years.

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